STEADFAST AND IMMOVABLE
April 12, 2009
Easter Sunday

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John 20:1–18
1 Corinthians 15:5–58
Psalm 118:5–19

"Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast immovable, . . .
because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain."
1 Corinthians 15:58 (NRSV)

Make no mistake: if He rose at all
it was as His body . . .
It was not as the flowers,
each soft Spring recurrent;
it was not as His Spirit in the mouths
and fuddled eyes of the eleven apostles;
it was as His Flesh: ours.
Let us not mock God with metaphor,
analogy, sidestepping transcendence;
making of the event a parable,
a sign painted in the
faded credulity of earlier ages:
let us walk through the door.

John Updike
"Seven Stanzas at Easter"

We have come to church, O God, as men and women came to a garden tomb,
before dawn, so many years ago. We have come, each of us in our own individual ways,
out of our own journeys, looking for Jesus, for hope, for life, for love. Startle us, O God,
with the improbable truth of this day: that he is not dead, but risen.
Give us faith to trust the good news, to trust him with our lives,
Jesus Christ our risen Lord. Amen

From the preacher's perspective, what isn't there not to love about Easter morning? People are unusually considerate and say nice things to us like

“Don’t work too hard; get enough sleep. I hope you make it through the week.” The hymns are the strongest in the book; everybody knows them and loves to sing them. Brass players, choir, and organists are at the top of their game. The flowers are gorgeous. Everyone is dressed up. A few hats make their annual appearance. All week long before Easter, people telephone to ask about the time of the services and which are the least crowded. (We received a unique question last Thursday from a couple in south Illinois: “We’re coming to church on Sunday. Is the Scottish guy in one of the services?”) And the pews are full. The preachers cannot resist the pleasant illusion that we are the reason that people are sitting on the edge of their seats in anticipation of what we have to say and, furthermore, that everyone will come back next Sunday. It is no coincidence that many of us take the next Sunday off, rather than face reality, although I have always felt that next Sunday—which is known in the trade as “Low Sunday”—is, in fact, the most significant Sunday of the year, as it was 2,000 years ago when a group of excited and confused followers of Jesus were asking and starting to answer the question, “OK, he’s risen. Now what do we do?”

I am grateful for your presence this morning. I’m grateful for Easter Christians, which is what we all are at heart.

What is there not to love about Easter? Only one thing, and it is that there is no language big enough for today’s topic, the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The truth is that the steepest climb of the year for the preacher is up the steps to the pulpit on Easter morning. We turn everywhere we can think of for help, for a new angle about a story everybody knows. In an essay about the challenge, Michael Lindvall, the pastor of the Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City, says that it’s good for the preacher to remember that she or he is about to prepare the billionth Easter sermon in history. Jim Lowry, Pastor Emeritus at Idlewild Presbyterian Church in Memphis, tells the delightful story of arranging for a talented friend to make a cross-stitched sampler for him, the kind that usually announces “Home Sweet Home” or “Bless this House.” Jim arranged for his sampler to read “I Have Focused on Disputatious Testimony That Refuses Closure.” Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann said that, and Jim had it made into a sampler so he can look at every day because it helps him deal with Easter: “Disputatious Testimony That Refuses Closure” (*Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2009).

There are four accounts of what happened on the first Easter morning, and they are, in fact, “disputatious.” They tell it differently, with different people responding in different ways.

In Matthew, Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary” go to the tomb where Jesus was buried. There is an earthquake, an angel appears, rolls back the stone and sits on it.

In Mark, it is the two Marys and Salome; a young man in a white robe tells them Jesus has been raised. They flee in terror and say nothing to anyone.

In Luke's account, it is the two Marys again and Joanna. When they tell the disciples what happened, they are dismissed: an idle tale. Peter, alone, goes to see the empty tomb for himself.

In the Fourth Gospel, Mary Magdalene goes to the garden tomb. It is still dark. She discovers that the stone that sealed the tomb has been moved. She assumes someone has stolen the body. She runs to tell Peter and John. Then there is a footrace—Peter and John—run to see what happened. The younger man, John, wins the race, sees the stone moved; when Peter arrives, he goes into the tomb and sees the grave clothes. John follows, sees, they "believe," but we're not told what, maybe just that the body is gone, as Mary said, and they both "return to their homes."

Four different accounts of one event: "Disputatious Testimony." Why didn't someone in the early centuries, as the books of the New Testament were being assembled, clean them up a little bit, do a little editing, so that the story of the resurrection—which, after all, is the central, formative Christian story—is coherent, with at least consistency and the same cast of characters? And yet, trial lawyers and judges know that when all the evidence presented in court is perfectly consistent, in all probability the evidence has been altered, because, in fact, different people, after the fact, describe the same event differently. So discrepancies in the accounts are not necessarily evidence of tampering with the text, but maybe the exact opposite: they are authentic records of an event experienced by different individuals, who later described it very differently.

The Gospel of John tells the story in two parts. In part one, there is a lot of running back and forth. Mary discovers that the stone has been moved and runs to tell Peter and John. Peter and John run to the tomb, discover that it is empty, and then, presumably, run back home. No one has said anything about a resurrection. Mary clearly believes someone has stolen the body. She's worried because there was no opportunity to anoint the body and give Jesus a proper burial. Part two: when things settle down, Mary returns to the garden tomb a second time. Perhaps she wants to be alone with her grief. Two angels ask her why she weeps. "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." Still no mention of resurrection. Mary is still focused on doing what needs to be done. And then there is the experience, for which words simply seem inadequate. Jesus is there. She thinks it is the gardener, asks him where the body is. Jesus says her name, "Mary," an intensely personal moment, and she knows something indescribable, something impossible, unthinkable has happened. He is risen. Jesus is alive.

Mary is in a new world now. Old certainties about life and death have been shattered. It didn't take long for people to understand that if Jesus was raised from the dead, the future looks very different. God is doing a new thing, an astonishing thing. In the resurrection, the promised new creation is happening. History has new possibility now. Hatred, oppression, injustice, and death have been overturned. The worst that human beings can do happened to Jesus and was shown to be powerless in the face of the love of God. Things like justice and peace and compassion and human dignity are not just the idle dreams of the naïve and hopelessly optimistic but the realities upon which the universe rests. Therefore, you can trust and live and work for a better world, for peace, and justice, because in Jesus Christ they have triumphed over death.

St. Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, a church living with the constant threat of persecution and extinction, that because of the resurrection none of their work, their efforts, their faithfulness was in vain. Be steadfast, immovable, he told them.

If Jesus is alive, Easter is not just about something that happened long ago, but is a reality now. If Jesus is alive, God continues to create and redeem and save the world. Mary, Peter and John, you and I live in a new world, full of hope and possibility, and he calls us to start living and hoping and rolling up our sleeves and working for God's new Easter creation.

Jesus died, went all the way into the valley of the shadow of death, and if God raised him up and defeated the power of death, things are very different for us.

Sarah Sarchet Butter, formerly on the staff of this church, now pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Wilmette, led her congregation through an unspeakable tragedy last month. The husband of her administrative assistant and office manager shot and killed his wife and her son and then killed himself. Sarah had to lead and comfort and hold people together and preside and speak at a memorial service for mother and son. What in the world can you say in that situation? She chose wisely. She said there is one phrase in the Apostles' Creed that had always bothered her: that Jesus "descended into hell." She told how the pastor of the church in which she grew up was so bothered by that line that one time he went through all the hymnals where the creed was pasted inside the cover and with a large black magic marker crossed out "he descended into hell." Sarah said, "I grew up saying the creed without that line."

"But this week," she said, "I understood that phrase in the creed. We have descended into hell together. . . . He has gone before us, into every corner

of it. The good news is that when life takes us there, when we have to go there, he goes with us.

“And the good news is that, on the third day, God raised him from the dead. And he ascended into heaven that we might be raised with him.”

It was a powerful affirmation of our Christian faith in the midst of one of the most dreadfully tragic situations imaginable. It was an affirmation of the good news of Easter, of Jesus Christ, dead, descended into hell, alive, strong, leading into a new future.

What happened in the garden, in the early light of dawn, that mysterious time when you can’t quite see clearly, when a man Mary Magdalene knew was dead, or thought she knew was dead, spoke her name—that moment was deeply personal. And so this matter of resurrection becomes deeply personal for each of us sooner or later. This is about our life and about death, and it doesn’t get any more personal than that.

Fleming Rutledge, Episcopal priest and popular author, says she looks forward to Easter “more keenly each year as I get older, because there isn’t anything we can do about death. It’s so damned inexorable, and I do mean ‘damned.’ We feel its power as a hostile invading power.” The elegant Dorothy Parker once said about death, “I do not approve.” And Woody Allen, asked about the immortality of great works of film artistry said, “Personally, I’d rather achieve immortality by not dying.”

What happened to Mary Magdalene in the garden when Jesus spoke her name was deeply personal. Serene Jones, the new President of Union Theological Seminary in New York City and a very distinguished academic, says Easter is not, finally, about ideas, theories, or even creedal affirmation, hypotheses about possibilities of resurrection; it is about our personal relationship with God. She writes: “Like Mary we long to be known by God, to be held in God’s gaze, to be seen by God as the object of God’s love and care.” The astonishing news of Easter is that it is exactly how he comes—not only to introduce God’s new creation into history, but to you and me, to call us by name and to invite us to live lives that know that death has been overcome, that because he lives, we shall live also.

The late Henri Nouwen, thinking about our mortality, wrote, “The resurrection is God’s way of revealing to us that nothing that belongs to God will ever go to waste. What belongs to God will never get lost. . . . The risen Jesus reveals that God’s love for us, our love for one another, our love for those who lived before us and who will live after us, is not just a quickly passing experience but an eternal reality” (*Our Greatest Gift: Meditations on Death and Dying*, p. 109). That’s how personal this is. Your love for those who preceded you, your love for those who will outlive you, is not a passing,

temporary experience, limited by your mortality. It is eternal: your love taken up into the heart of God, unshakeable, unmovable, forever.

People who attended a funeral here last October experienced something of that. Our colleague, Associate Pastor Dana Ferguson, died. Dana came to Fourth Church eleven years ago as Associate Pastor for Mission. After a first struggle with serious liver disease five years ago, she recovered and returned to the staff as Executive Associate Pastor.

She was beloved by everyone who knew her. She had an infectious laugh. Her attire was anything but clergy somber. Her specialty was brightly colored stockings and great hats at Easter. She was a wife and mother of twin, eleven-year-old sons. She was forty-two years old. Dana had a deep commitment to social justice and inclusiveness in society at large and in the church, inclusiveness of everyone who wants to be part, in all aspects of leadership. She believed in the love of God in Jesus Christ that transcends barriers human beings create: race, class, gender, and, in our time, particularly barriers of sexual orientation. She loved this church: its mission, its ministries of caring, its worship. Her sermons were heartfelt, her prayers eloquent. She had a gift of gathering up our concerns and gathering us all in.

Her illness returned in the middle of last year, and by the end of summer it was clear that her condition was serious. She spent most of the fall in the hospital and underwent a number of surgeries and procedures, none of which seemed to help. On October 27 she died.

She had planned her funeral, chose hymns and scripture. She asked Donna Gray and Calum MacLeod to read and pray, and she asked me to preach: “a full twenty-minute sermon, not one of those little bitty funeral meditations.” This sanctuary was full; we sang the great hymns; Tower Brass played and the choir sang; we heard scriptures; and I preached—a twenty-minute sermon. At the end, after the benediction, Calum, Donna, and I preceded the casket up the center aisle, with her Ferguson stole draped over it as a bagpiper played “Amazing Grace.” Her husband, Wayne, sons Daniel and Taylor, her mother and sister followed. It was the saddest moment all of us had ever experienced. Tower Brass played the postlude, “Just a Closer Walk with Thee.” After one slow and somber stanza, Tower Brass modulated into up-tempo Dixieland, and smiles appeared through tears, and people laughed: Dana had loved New Orleans. And when the music stopped, the most amazing thing happened: the congregation stood and applauded. A standing ovation for Dana and her life and ministry, a standing ovation for God by a community bonded together by resurrection.

John Updike wrote a wonderful poem in 1961 for, I am happy to say, the *Christian Century*: “Seven Stanzas at Easter.” Updike was a very

distinguished author, essayist, literary critic, and poet. He was also a believer, a church member, a Sunday School teacher. He died on January 27, and those of us who were regularly enriched by his writing greatly miss him. ‘Seven Stanzas at Easter” will find its way into a lot of Easter sermons this year I suspect:

> Let us not mock God with metaphor,
> analogy, sidestepping transcendence,
> making of the event a parable,
> a sign painted in the faded credulity of earlier ages.
> Let us walk through the door.

Updike has walked through that door. Remarkably, in his last months of life he wrote a group of wonderful poems, which were published in the *New Yorker* after he died. When he realized he might be seriously sick, he wrote,

> How not to think of death?
> I see clear through to the ultimate page . . .
> Be with me, words, a little longer.

He wrote the last poem December 22; he thinks about Sunday School and Christmas pageants, the ordinary mystery of ordinary people believing and trusting, and concludes, in the last lines he ever wrote, remembering the words of the beloved Twenty-Third Psalm:

> Surely—magnificent, that “surely”—goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, my life forever.

That’s it finally. Because Jesus Christ is risen, because of Easter, we know surely that mercy shall follow all the days of our lives and the lives of our dear ones and beyond, forever.

The Gospel says simply that when that astonishing day was over, Peter and John returned to their homes. So may we return to our homes, our lives in the world, steadfast and immovable, with resolve to follow him all the days of our lives, with laughter and great joy in our hearts.

> For Christ our Lord is risen.
> He is risen indeed.

Amen.